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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001904

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Amid some positive news, violence in east leaves at least seven suspected Tiger supporters dead

Refs: (A) FBIS Reston Va DTG 100403Z OCT 02

- (B) FBIS Reston Va DTG 091457Z OCT 02
- (C) FBIS Reston Va DTG 091245Z OCT 02
- (D) Colombo 1891, and previous

(U) Classified by W. Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: Police shot and killed at least seven suspected Tamil Tiger supporters on October 9. The incident was triggered by an attempt to storm a police station in the east. On a positive note for the peace process, the Tigers released six soldiers after obtaining the release of two of their cadre. In addition, responding to the successful intervention of GSL Minister Moragoda, over 200 prisoners suspected of ties with the Tigers have halted a hunger strike. Given the mix of good news with the bad, the peace process seems to have lurched into a particularly volatile period. End Summary.

Bloody Incident in the East

2. (SBU) Special Task Force (STF) police and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) supporters engaged in a bloody firefight on October 9. The incident took place near Akkaraipattu, a coastal town in the eastern district of Ampara. While reports are sketchy, the incident apparently was touched off by an argument between STF police and LTTE operatives backed up Tamil civilians. The operatives reported the incident to an adjacent LTTE base, and a group of suspected LTTE cadre, apparently joined by Tamil supporters, decided to storm a nearby STF camp. It is not clear who took the first shot, but the STF, firing heavily, repelled the attack, with its forces sustaining several injuries during the incident. (Note: The STF is a highly trained police unit deployed throughout Ampara. Three-thousand strong in Ampara, the STF has had considerable success countering the LTTE, largely due to its small unit tactics. End Note.)

3. (C) The incident has prompted considerable concern about its potential ramifications for the peace process. Indeed, based on reports Mission is receiving today, the east is quite tense over the incident, although no violence has been reported as of yet. Milinda Moragoda, an important GSL minister involved in peace-related issues, told us that he was very worried about what the LTTE might do in response. (Note: For its part, the LTTE has not yet apparently announced what it plans to do, if anything.) Nimal Goonetilleke, the head of the STF, was rushing to Ampara today to check on the situation. Moragoda added that the Norwegian-run Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) was also planning to investigate the incident.

4. (C) ((Note: Even before this latest incident, the east has been the epicenter of much instability. There has been a recent spike in anger among Muslims in the area, for example, over what they perceive to be their marginalization in the peace process. The situation seems to be growing worse: there are reports that a number of Muslim MPs are now threatening to boycott Parliament if their concerns about the peace process are not met. Moragoda told us that the GSL was trying to head off this protest. End Note.)))

LTTE Releases Soldiers

5. (C) On a positive note for the peace process, a two week-old standoff between the GSL and the LTTE in Trincomalee has ended. As foreshadowed in Ref D, the LTTE released six Sri Lankan soldiers from detention

late October 9. The LTTE took this action after the government met the group's demand and released two LTTE cadre from its custody earlier in the day. During a meeting with visiting DRL P/DAS Parmly on October 10, K.C. Kamalasabayson, the Attorney General, expressed relief that the situation had been resolved, noting that the standoff had proved destabilizing in Trincomalee. (Note: Many Sinhalese and some Muslims in the area had taken to the streets in various demonstrations protesting the LTTE's detention of the soldiers.) Kamalasabayson said he had urged the judge involved in the LTTE cadre's case to grant bail and release them in order to cool the situation down.

Hunger Strike Lifted

16. (SBU) In another positive development, Tamils detained in various prisons lifted their hunger strike on October 9. The approximately 200 detainees, who had begun their action on October 1, were demanding their immediate release from jails in Kalutara (south of Colombo), Batticaloa in the east, and elsewhere. The prisoners asserted that the law they were being held under, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), was unfair and should be repealed. The strike ended after a visit to Kalutara prison, where most of the detainees are housed, by Minister Moragoda late on October 9. Moragoda pledged to the detainees that the government would carefully look at their cases in the next 30 days in an effort to see whom it could release. Attorney General Kamalasabayson confirmed to P/DAS Parmly that his office would actively review the detainees' cases. He thought that most of the detainees probably merited release. About 50, however, were hard-core LTTE cadre who had been engaged in terrorist attacks, who could not be released.

17. (C) ((Note: Apparently in reaction to the complaints of the detainees and the LTTE about the act, Kamalasabayson noted that the government was actively considering revoking the PTA. Confirming the Attorney General's comments, Mission has learned that the weekly cabinet meeting on October 9 actively considered the issue of doing away with the PTA, which has been in place for almost 25 years now. The cabinet agreed to review the issue further.))

Comment

18. (C) Given the mix of good news with the bad, the peace process seems to have lurched into a particularly volatile period. Due to the Ampara incident, the situation in the east seems to be even more tense than usual. It is still not clear what the LTTE reaction will be, but the group rarely backs down when it feels it is under pressure. On the other hand, the GSL gave the LTTE what it wanted with respect to the de facto prisoner exchange in Trincomalee and by agreeing to reconsider the utility of the PTA. Whether this will be enough to assuage the LTTE is unknown.

19. (C) (Note: Regarding the LTTE's possible reaction to the Ampara incident, Moragoda told us that senior Tiger negotiator Anton Balasingham was supposed to transit Colombo today in order to visit the LTTE leadership in the north. The trip was postponed at the last moment, however, and he wondered whether Balasingham was angry over what took place in Ampara. When asked, the Norwegian Embassy told us that it thought that "practical reasons" had prevented Balasingham's visit, but it was still checking. End Note.) End Comment.

110. (U) Minimize considered.
WILLS